Le stanze della mente

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English translation · Opening excerpt · Riccardo Edizioni

PROLOGUE

The director was tied up on yet another interminable phone call, throwing around incomprehensible jargon for the sole purpose of impressing some investor who didn't even know where his fortune had come from. The man was filthy rich and had no idea where to put his mountain of money. With his feet up on his desk, the director finally managed to get off the call. By then he had a splitting headache.

"Oh God, please. Tell me there's a painkiller in this drawer!"

He fished out a pill, tossed it into his mouth and opened the bottle of sparkling water on his desk. It fizzed over, spattering his white shirt.

"Damn it!"

The phone rang again. "For fuck's sake! Can't I get a minute's peace?"

He picked up with a sigh. Before he could introduce himself, the voice on the other end cut him off.

"What did you say? … You're joking." His eyes widened. "All right, all right. I'll take the phone straight to him! Thank you, Doctor. Have a good day."

He rushed out of his office and headed for the lobby.

PART ONE

The walls were crumbling. Plaster flaked away beneath the mould that had devoured every inch, spreading from floor to ceiling in a fine, silvery fuzz. The air was thick with damp and hard to breathe. Spores hung in the faint light filtering through a narrow gap at the top of the windows. The frames had rotted, the panes were gone and the handles had turned green with corrosion. Moss clung to the furniture in the cavernous, foul-smelling room and spread unchecked across the floor, making it wet and slippery. Huge cobwebs hung from the ceiling, spun by a spider that knew how to catch its next meal. In the middle of the room, a hospital bed lay on its side.

"Aaah!"

A man let out a guttural scream. A sudden, stabbing pain had jolted him out of a deep sleep. He was half naked, wearing black underwear, white socks and a light blue shirt, with a leather holster strapped around his waist.

He tried to bring his right hand to his aching chest, but couldn’t. He turned and saw that he was handcuffed to the rusted bed.

“Help! Somebody … Aaah, it hurts! What’s happening to me?”

The sharp, relentless pain made it hard to move, let alone breathe. Every breath felt like a knife in his chest.

“What the fuck is going on? I’m handcuffed. And what’s this?”

He looked at the bed. Leather straps like the one on his holster were fixed to the metal frame. They were lined with soft white fabric to keep them from injuring whoever was strapped down. Two at the head, two at the foot, and a much wider, sturdier one across the middle.

“What the hell is this place?”

Desperation began to take hold. His heart pounded so hard he could feel it in his throat. Sweat broke out on his skin and panic set in. He began to shake and scream.

“Help! Somebody help me!”

His words caught in his throat as he sobbed, and tears streaked his cheeks. The pain was as sharp as ever.

Come on. Get a grip. I’m getting nowhere like this.

He tried to steady his breathing, drawing his knees up to his chest and curling into a ball. Oddly enough, it made him feel safer. Slowly, his breathing eased and his heart stopped racing. The tears dried, and at last the sobbing stopped. Once he’d calmed down a little, he looked around and tried to work out where he was.

“This is disgusting. The whole place is falling apart!”

Sickened by the smell and the sight of all that rot, he decided that if he wanted to get out of there, he had to free himself from the bed first. He gripped the bars and tested them. The metal was so badly corroded that one sharp tug ought to snap it. He wrapped his hands around the bar, braced both feet against the frame and counted to three. Then he yanked as hard as he could. The bar broke.

Free at last, he stood up and took a closer look around.

A desk curved out from the wall in a semicircle, with office chairs tucked inside it. Behind them were two bricked-up windows. Three rows of bricks were missing at the top, letting in the only light. Smashed computers lay on the desk. Behind him, the wall opened into a recessed area two steps below the level where he'd woken up. Set into the middle of the wall was an enormous door, tall and imposing. It looked heavy enough to be the main entrance.

He took the two steps in one leap and rushed up to the door. Despite the pain in his chest, he began hammering on it with his fists.

"HELP! Somebody help me! I'm in here! Open up! If you can hear me, open this damn door!"

No one answered. After more pounding and shouting, he noticed a keypad at shoulder height on the wall to his left. It had letters and numbers and was connected to a lock. He tried pressing a few keys at random, hoping to hear the click of the lock releasing.

Nothing happened.

"Open up, for God's sake!"

Desperation took hold again, and the pain grew worse.

"OPEN UP! Open the door!"

He slid to the floor, sobbing, his back against the wall and his hands in his hair.

After screaming and pounding the floor until he had no strength left, he tried to make sense of what was happening.

I don't understand. Where am I? This pain in my chest won't let up. It's like being stabbed over and over.

He pulled his shirt aside to check.

That's strange. There's nothing there. Who brought me here? Was I kidnapped? Why am I here? What do they want from me?

He kept turning the questions over in his mind, hoping one of them might lead to an answer. He knew he was getting nowhere in this state. He got to his feet and tried to force the door open again.

"Okay. Think."

He concentrated, trying to come up with something.

Nothing.

What can I do? I haven't got a clue.

Defeated and out of ideas, he sat down on the steps.

"Don't give up. You have no idea how many times I've tried to open that door."

He shot to his feet, clutching his chest as another stab of pain hit him.